Chapter IV

Crossing the Digital Divide: Online Portfolios in a Diverse Student Environment

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Abstract

Traditional portfolios, typically in the form of three-ring binders, are now being replaced with electronic versions on CD-ROM, DVD and the Internet. Two directions for electronic portfolios are those created with software tools found on computers, or Web-based storage systems generally accompanied by data management systems that allow assessment of portfolio data. The use of electronic portfolios, either Web-based or software generated, offers great promise but also poses significant challenges. This chapter describes the challenges and successes involved in crossing the digital divide from traditional to Web-based portfolios in a diverse student environment in higher education.
Introduction

Over the past two decades, American education has seen tremendous demographic changes that have created a student population more racially, ethnically and culturally diverse than ever before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005), 42% of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group in 2003, an increase from 22% in 1972. In comparison, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 78% to 58%. At the college level, student diversity is also on the increase. According to the American Council on Education’s (ACE) Minorities in Higher Education Twenty-First Annual Status Report (ACE, 2005), college enrollment of minorities rose by nearly 1.5 million students (52%) to more than 4.3 million from 1991 to 2001.

Working with a diverse student population presents unique challenges in that students differ in terms of educational experiences, levels of income, home language, culture and ways of learning. Given the growing diversity in campuses across the nation, educators are beginning to legitimize multiple paths to learning and the notion of multiple literacies. With the growing acceptance by educators of the theory of multiple intelligences as developed by Howard Gardner (1983, 1999), the tide is rising in favor of capturing the wisdom of our students in multiple ways (Roach, 2001). The challenge for educators is how to capture the varied backgrounds and strengths inherent in a diverse student population. Traditional measures of assessment (i.e., paper-and-pencil tests) do not enable students to use and demonstrate a broad range of abilities. In today’s digital world, however, educators are discovering that technology offers great promise for diverse student populations. “Today’s technologies are capable of giving full recognition of student achievements that can capture a ‘snapshot’ of the multiple literacies of our students that have been neglected or limited by the traditional measures used to demonstrate or measure performance” (Roach, 2001, p. 2).

Electronic portfolios are an increasingly popular way of using technology to display and assess students’ abilities, particularly in teacher education programs (Barrett, 2005). Portfolios are purposeful collections of student work that demonstrate effort, progress and/or achievement (Barrett, 1999; Russell & Butcher, 1999). Two directions for electronic teaching portfolios are those created with software tools found on computers or Web-based storage systems generally accompanied by data management systems that allow assessment of portfolio data (Gibson & Barrett, 2003). Web-based assessment systems support consistent, secure storage and aggregate reporting of assessment information and are likely to be increasing in significance due to the requirements of accrediting agencies for institutions of higher education and the advantages of Web-based portfolios over more traditional modes of assessment.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the challenges and successes involved in crossing the digital divide to Web-based portfolios in a diverse student environment in higher education. We will begin with a review of the benefits of technology and a discussion of electronic portfolios as an emerging educational tool for teacher education. We will then provide an account of one school of education’s journey from traditional portfolios, typically in the form of three-ring binders, to Web-based portfolios with a student body primarily comprised of Asian-Pacific Islanders.
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